"THE EYES DON'T HAVE IT"

VIDEO IMAGES AND ETHNOGRAPHY

BY

RON BURNETT ©

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Eric Michaels and Wandjuk Marika.

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1. Visual Media and Indigenous Cultures

I will weave through a series of juxtapositions in this essay drawn from a number of experiences which I have had in the "field" of ethnography - a kind of bricolage - or as James Clifford has put it, an 'ethnographic surrealism'.[1] In retrospect these fragments are linked in ways which I could not have anticipated before I made the attempt to understand the connections. This kind of reconstruction interests me because it is a combination of personal history and field work, evidence of an effort to explore and map the relationship between subjectivity, analysis and experience. More than that it is a way of specifying and revealing the presence of 'theory' within the subjective - a strategy for talking about theory 'through' subjectivity and for me, in this context, a convenient tool for linking the work of Eric Michaels with my own concerns.

It is of course more than appropriate that I dedicate this essay to the memory of Eric Michaels. His essays and his brillant monograph entitled, **Aboriginal Invention of Television** (1986) reveal a sensibility closely tied to the radical innovations of ethnographic thought over the last decade.[2] Michaels explored the frontiers of one of my major interests, the impact of video and television on indigenous cultures. He achieved this by rethinking the notion of "effects" - the ways in which white, imperial cultures

control and attempt to dominate other societies - and not positing anything like a linear model for what happens when new technologies are thrust upon indigenous peoples. His insights in this regard are very significant. In his essay on Hollywood iconography (Michaels 1988:119) Michaels points out many of the radical differences in understanding which the Wapiri have with regards to American films and television. Not only are the plots dealt with differently but the characters in these films are reinterpreted according to the specific exigencies of Walpiri culture and social life.

The suggestion for example that violent films available through video stores produce violent effects upon the peoples who watch them, or that the Walpiri might suffer irreparable harm due to the cinema that they are exposed to, is a condescending and disrespectful attitude which does not account for the very particular context of the viewer nor of the specific culture in which they live. The 'effects' of western cultural phenomena cannot be approached as long as there are intellectual models in place which patronize 'other' cultures and deny to them precisely the strength to resist and recreate what they are exposed to. (The current use of video by the Yanomami in the Amazon rain forest is a testament to this creativity and the impact of their videotapes has been felt world-wide.) To his credit Michaels understood the depth of Walpiri creativity and also the important political ramifications of their video work.

All of this is of course, in part, the very question of ethnography itself - a question to ethnography - about how to analyse the strategic choices which different cultures make in response to the influences which they have on each other. The question of vantage point - where and how these choices can be examined was a central concern of Michaels. He tried to draw upon the experiences of nonprint media and apply them to the process through which ethnographic knowledge is transferred and transformed into visual and oral documents. This is made very clear in his article entitled, "How to Look at Us

Looking at the Yanomami Looking at Us,"[3] in which he says: "A solution is to address the entire process of visual media as a problem of communication, more specifically in cross-cultural translation." (Michaels 1982:145)

It may be, contrary to the instincts and method of Sol Worth and John Adair, and in contradistinction to the desires of Michaels, that nothing of value to indigenous cultures can be yielded in the process of translation and that the role of visual media is more important for imperial cultures than for colonised ones. But this would presume, as Michaels so often pointed out, that colonised cultures themselves have somehow escaped the influences of modern media, which as anyone who has been watching the growth and development of the video cassette recorder for example, knows is not the case. This still doesn't lessen one of the central dilemmas of ethnographic work with film and video. For the ethnographer it may be more important to uncover both the applicability and effects of the technology <u>than</u> to let the technology work its way through the society in question and let that society find the measure of its own response. I think that it would not be too radical an assertion to say that the response of indigenous cultures to <u>cultural</u> phenomena cannot be ascertained clearly until those cultures have devised strategies of response, whatever form those responses might take.

Working its way through - what do I mean? A process perhaps which may not be open to external examination and without wanting to push the point too far a process which may produce forms of internal and culturally specific images which cannot be judged, evaluated or examined from the outside. I want to be careful here because I am not suggesting that a vantage point cannot be found which might permit one culture to examine another, but there is the matter, and I consider it to be an important one, of how we go about understanding our own history with respect to modern media, let alone the history of other cultures.

There is a tendency, manifest in many ethnographic projects but even more so when film and video are put to use, to presume that what other cultures choose as images can actually be translated, and it is this presumption which I think needs to be contested because what is inevitably involved are complex sign systems which our own culture has had difficulty in interpreting for itself let alone for others. This is a fascinating and perplexing problem. It suggests a kind of opaqueness which the universalizing tendencies of modern film and television theory have not grappled with. But the question needs to be asked otherwise we may have to accept Marshall McLuhan's predictions about a global village produced through technologies of communications. If we do accept his predictions then the complex and rather 'different' images which the Aboriginal peoples of Australia produced, and which Eric Michaels documented, simply become part of a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.

On the other side of this debate about cultural specificity what can be said about countries as different as Australia, India, Taiwan, New Guinea, Tanzania, Israel, Indonesia and the United States sharing a similar and explosive growth in the availability of video cassette recorders and camcorders? Does the presence of video technology, its mere presence, convey a set of similar concerns, a meshing of cultural and artistic traditions? Does the existence of mini-videotheaters throughout Asia showing a mix of tapes from Hong Kong and Hollywood suggest <u>uniform</u> modes of understanding and comprehension? (Hollywood's challenge to cultural specificity has yet to be seriously examined by ethnographers.)

Eric Michaels addressed these issues through his work with the Yuendumu and I am particularly interested in one tape which he analyses in depth in his monograph on the **Aboriginal Invention of Television**. The videomaker, Jupurrula, set out to make a video

about the massacre of Aboriginal peoples at Coniston. Briefly, in1928 a white trapper and prospector, Frederick Brooks was killed at Crown Creek near Coniston by two members of the Walpiri tribe. Subsequently the police massacred over one hundred members of the tribe and Jupurrula wanted to go to the site of the killings in order to retell the story from an Aboriginal point of view. Aside from the fascinating details of how the tape was actually made Michaels comments on the use of landscape shots in the video. "The most striking characteristic is exceptionally long landscape pans; indeed there is more attention to landscape than to actors or action. This could easily be dismissed as the result of naive filmmaking in which static landscapes, which prove easier to record than moving people, receive more attention. These extremely long, uninterrupted takes are also associated with unsophisticated filmmaking." (Michaels 1986: 62) [4]

Michaels goes on to discuss how the landscape pans are in fact very complex and how every feature of the landscape has a set of meanings attached to it. The meanings, which are sometimes historical and often symbolic, cannot be understood by viewers unfamiliar with the culturally specific readings which the Walpiri confer on the image and which they expect the image to contain. It should be mentioned that Jupurrula made this videotape with a group of Walpiri and that all of the people involved had had extensive exposure to white European culture and in particular to video through rental stores in the district. It is therefore even more fascinating that their experience as viewers wasn't translated in the videomaking and that they worked so hard to make the medium reflect their own cultural interests.

This shouldn't be surprising because there remains a vast gap between the arrival of new technologies and the way in which those technologies are used. Thus, the availability of video and the use to which the medium is put may not provide us with enough information as to its effects. In addition, any extrapolation of effect may not be able to

account for the complexity of indigenous responses which are located in quite specific cultural and historical frameworks. Allen S. Weiss has commented on this in a recent article in **Art & Text**. "We might remember, as a cautionary tale, the story told by Eric Michaels about the Aboriginal television program where all that 'we' saw was the most banal sort of "home video" depicting an empty, bleak landscape; but the tribal members observed the confluence of Dreamtime and historical representation, of myth and legend, in a landscape signifying an originary event of their culture. It is precisely within such an ironic intercultural misunderstanding that the 'magic of the earth' truly escapes us: even if we know of their history, and their gods, we also know that their deities cannot touch us. We can never truly know their art if we do not believe in their gods." [5] If we take the above at face value then there really is little, at a universal level, to connect one culture to another. My own empathy for the Dreamtime for example, both as a mode of storytelling and as lived experience does not mean that I have genuinely understood the way in which Aboriginal culture lives the Dreamtime. Only recently Eric Michaels critiqued Bruce Chatwin's book **The Songlines** because of the author's almost presumptuous romanticism and clear inability to understand the complex history and use of "dreaming tracks" (Michaels 1988:48). While his critique does not ultimately challenge ethnography it is clear that Michaels was very much caught up in trying to overcome any essentialist arguments with respect to Aboriginal culture. He was concerned with how authors like Chatwin use aboriginal culture to further their own aims while at the same time disavowing any connection to the forms of anthropological discourse which they are creating. Under the guise of fiction/diary Chatwin transformed aboriginal concerns into his own but that may well be what is most interesting about the book in any case.

There is therefore an inevitable tension between the particular and the general, between the contingencies which make one historical event more important than another, and the ability which our culture has to situate our comprehension of forms of symbolic

organization external to our own. In terms of video this is a very serious problem because the image, 'images which come from somewhere else', tend to suggest a kind of transparent directness, an intercultural nexus, which makes it seem as if they can be understood. Put another way even the <u>naming</u> of that portion of the Walpiri video which deals with landscape may send us off in the wrong direction simply because of the etymological history and cultural weight of the term, landscape. This doesn't mean that a pan of a landscape is not one, rather, the pan as such means one thing to us and another to the Walpiri. And if we are to comprehend the differences we must in the first instance, be quite aware of the 'effect' which the video has had upon us. As John Von Sturmer has remarked an ethnographic film or video can attempt to show the truth viewed from the outside <u>as if</u> it is operating from within. (Von Sturmer 1989: 135) I would extend his comment to suggest that what attracts us to particular forms of visual expression in ethnography, to particular ways of revealing another culture's concerns and dreams, stories and daily life is precisely that we can only <u>see</u> that which we have already anticipated as visual. (This would explain the extraordinary popularity of **First Contact** which uses racist archival films of indigenous peoples in New Guinea as found footage with the result that it appears somehow to be new even though that kind of footage has been seen before and would under any other circumstances be rejected for its racism. The fascination with the archival material seems to be situated in its apparent innocence, the mere fact that it exists and the pleasure our culture gets from knowing or at least presuming that we have transcended what the footage reveals. (Burnett 1984:69)

The theories which we use in Western cultures to explain the media to ourselves may not be applicable or even useful when applied to what the Walpiri have done. This raises the rather interesting problem that we may be using what Jupurrula made to justify our own particular expectations about video, expectations for example that using the medium may provide Aboriginal peoples with more control over it as a technology. But that is an

assumption based on what set of experiences? community video? the work of Sol Worth and John Adair? ethnography itself? How do we evaluate the interaction between new technologies and indigenous peoples? What conceptual tools are best suited to dealing with the very particular characteristics of video? Eric Michael's effort to answer these questions was tragically cut short. In the following I hope to raise even more questions in what clearly has to be a long term investigation into the ways in which images influence both our own and other cultures.

2. Structuralism, Film Theory and Ethnography

In the late 1960's under the aegis of **Screen Magazine** Film Studies (upon which a good many of the ideas and theories about video are based)   'borrowed' extensively from linguistics, structuralism and poststructuralism. The history of that borrowing cannot be gone into here suffice to say that the recognition of film as a representational device came hand in hand with an equally important debate about whether the image, hitherto taken as iconic, was in fact more complex, with effects which extended far beyond the rather limited notions of analogy which had governed much of film criticism and analysis up until that time. The join of semiotics and structuralism with textual analysis, the introduction of the work of Roland Barthes, the debates in **Cinéthique** and **Cahiers du Cinéma** around Louis Althusser and the role and effects of ideology upon subjectivity, contributed to an explosion in the field of Film Studies, the reverberations of which are still being felt today.

Much of the impetus for what I have just mentioned began in the mid-sixties, at the peak of the Nouvelle Vague. Filmmakers were making films which challenged the tools of analysis available at that time. It was this particular conjuncture which led to an increasing dissatisfaction with the paradigms in use for the study of the medium. Those

paradigms, when applied to film, tended to exclude the history of ideas which had given them their legitimacy and strength in the first place. Some of the paradigms were derived from the study of literature and seemed to have little sense of the specificity of film, and little desire to develop arguments which might have distinguished film from other cultural productions. Of course, in retrospect that was an historically simplistic assessment because the dominance of certain paradigms needed, precisely, to be defined from within the debates which had generated them. The effort should have been to examine why certain forms of literary criticism, for example, were so attractive, and why it would not have been harmful to explore those attractions precisely from within the institutional settings which had produced them. The response to the use of literary models was to look for alternatives and too often those alternatives were proposed as fundamental breaks, grand epistemological shifts, and ironically, the pressure to achieve those shifts, the practice of intellectual debate and exchange, was foregrounded as a political activity.

Structuralism for example, was applied to the study of the cinema in part as a response to the lack of methodology in the study of film as literature. This is not to suggest that literary criticism was without its own methods, far from it, but that film didn't submit as easily to those methods as first thought. The dissatisfaction sprang from clear dissimilarities in the object of study (even though that was often disputed as well) but also from the sense that film played a different cultural role from literature, and that it would be important to specify how those differences operated, especially at the level of meaning. Structuralism was embraced because it suggested that culture, and in particular, film, could be studied at a synchronic level and that there were laws to which all cultural products adhered. The move from law to code and back was a significant part of the impulse to bring semiotics into the study of the cinema, but it begs the point to suggest that this was an intellectual shift and a politically important one at that. Structuralism had

already transformed anthropology and it was the echoes of that transformation which were heard by people studying the cinema. Yet the debate around Claude Lévi-Strauss' work was no sooner incorporated into film studies than it was abandoned. The question here, is not whether that was a good or bad move, but whether the impulse to take up the structuralist model was based on anything more than a desire to fill the obvious gaps which a methodologically impovrished discipline had discovered within its own realm.

It was in fact the question of 'film as language' which came to dominate the early phase of Film Studies and though the metaphor had been present in numerous books and articles before Christian Metz's **Film Language**, it actually gained strength as a consequence of Metz's rather ambiguous assertion that film was not a language in the strict sense of the word, but more like a language system. (Metz 1974:55) The ambiguity cut into Metz's desire to create a more rigourous model for examining how the cinema produces meaning, but ironically he had merely entered, albeit tentatively, the rather murky waters of a longstanding debate in linguistics and anthropology between synchronic and diachronic approaches to the study of language. The problem here is that the question of whether film is a language or like a language puts to the side the central but perhaps more important controversy of whether any experience of meaning, any context in which meaning is produced can ever be outside language systems. We think with language, we speak about what we see, we talk about what we dream, we write about what we experience and so on. Problems start when a <u>particular</u> model of language, in this case a structuralist model is used as if the contradictions which characterized its own construction need not be included in the transposition to another discipline. Anthony Wilden, in an analysis of Piaget's development of the concept of structure says the following, which I feel applies with even greater force to Metz:

I shall therefore concern myself with the representative metaphors within his text in order to demonstrate the epistemological foundations of the 'invisible' text immanent to the 'visible' text…the representative metaphor does not communicate to us only about the communication established in the theory. Such metaphors have a life of their own. Through their self-articulation in an implicit or invisible discourse, these metaphors come to captivate the writer, to the extent that everything he says may do no more than represent an essentially static ensemble of transformations of an original metaphoric set. The labels that he has (unconsciously) chosen for his universe of discourse may in effect exert such fatal fascinations on the writer, that in the end their self-articulation takes over from him. He no longer speaks his discourse; the discourse is speaking him." [6]

Metz's mistake in using and being used by the structural model was a serious one and what underlay it was the presumption that a grand new system could be put in place to explain how the cinema works, an all-encompassing paradigm which would unify the 'field' into a totalized and totalizing theoretical discourse. He repudiated some of that in his later writing but then he repeated the mistake in his use of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though a new and I think fertile field was opened up by the transposition of some of Lacan's main ideas, in particular the mirror phase, the same old problems arose again because Lacan's theory was just so powerful that Metz was forced to use it in a relatively uncritical way.[7]

The rather ambiguous status of the object film, its ephemeral presence, has led many researchers in the field to examine images as if the gap between viewer and screen will somehow be crossed or bridged by a closer examination of the screen or in the case of neo-formalists in an examination of celluloid. To overcome the ambiguities of

signification and communication in the cinema for example or on television, the tenuous link between screen and viewer has always been collapsed in favour of a reductive yet ideologically convenient realism. The paradoxes should by now be clear. The real, never outside of representation is not simply appropriated onto the screen. Representational processes cannot be reduced to an instance of the real within which they operate anyway. The distinction is one of level and not opposition.

For example, the many pictures and images which streamed out of Ethopia during the peak of its recent drought transformed the dying breaths of emaciated children into visual effect. The truth of those events is not in question here, but the fascination of western viewers is. And however painful it may be questions about visual effects have to be explored in precisely those instances when the screen appears to be the most realistic. For, if we are to talk about viewing we cannot divorce the fascination of the viewer with the 'death' of an other, nor can we separate this from the activity of voyeurism which necessarily encapsulates the very possibility of viewing itself. The 'other' in this instance is a child whose face tearfully reminds me of my own good fortune and so permits me to transcend the shock of her death, to evade a period of mourning, to live the nightmare as a dream. If I treat the face of that child as information (which underlies the notion that it is real) then I can take the message and do whatever I wish with it. This is exactly the convenience of realism because of its almost obsessive desire for truth, which in any case can be achieved by any number of representational strategies and need not be exclusively situated in the image per se.

The image is the weakest link in any exchange of ideas and yet the image sustains itself on the act of fascination which viewers bring to it, on the presumption that that weakness is unimportant. There is a sub-text to the images which have been coming out of Africa. No room here for anything but the stern male voice-over. Little leeway in the

presentation of the image. Simply, and presumably at an innocent level, the bare face of hunger, suffering and death. The sub-text can be described as classically modern, as the installation of yet another, 'other' for western culture, but whereas in the past that other has been conveniently 'primitive' it is now even more conveniently helpless, powerless.

The progenitors of these images desire them to have an effect, to convince, persuade, transform. They invest, and have an extraordinary degree of confidence in the image, the message. But the image and the message are not one and the same. To signify is not necessarily to communicate. The collapse of the former into the latter suggests an equivalence between the image and the viewer, precisely the problem which Eric Michaels encountered when he examined the 'landscape' footage shot by the Walpiri. The notion that images can be examined from within, as photographs often are, that landscapes as images for example can have meaning, presumes forms of communication which the Walpiri clearly showed don't exist. And yet, in our culture communication is assumed before it is examined - the landscape must have meaning otherwise why would it have been put there in the first instance? In other words, the message as such pre-exists the context of communication into which it is placed but this of course contributes to the elimination of context, the elimination of the unique position of different cultures and different subjects, the potential heterogeneity of viewing.

To me, the activity of viewing a film or a video is in part based on the imaginary, on the distance of the viewer from the apparatus, yet the apparatus is often substituted for the viewer because it has the kind of objective existence which permits that shift, which so to speak rescues the image from its 'non-objectness'. The apparatus ends up standing in as it were for the spectator. This is often what allows the camera to be confused with the eye. The subjectification of the apparatus breaks down the distance between the technology and its users, but it also confirms the technology in its place as the creator of the

experience of viewing. This subjectification can best be characterized as a projection - that is as a defensive reaction to the imagined power of the apparatus - a way of fending off the perceived or imagined effects of the apparatus upon the self. When the suggestion is made that the eye sees what the camera sees, sometimes less, sometimes more, the underlying aim is in fact to reenforce the denotative strength of the image, to downplay, if not eradicate the differences between the eye, the camera eye and the imaginary.

It is not unusual for the subject to be replaced by technology in film theory. The latter "speaks" a language which can be kept under control by sticking to a set of supposedly sovereign rules whose limitations are accepted as givens and which have transcended their creators. The 'subject' of course cannot exist outside of the conflicts of the symbolic and the imaginary, cannot but confront the inevitable frictions and cleavages which are produced by viewing, or in the face of those gaps repress, push away, deny their presence and influence.

Yet, the cinema and most certainly video, in nearly all of its national manifestations, even in those moments most fully devoted to realism, cannot escape its implication as a vehicle for the imaginary (the question is, why should it?), as a promoter of displacement, as a technology which contributes to and accelerates the gap between vision and knowledge. These displacements are at the heart of what we might be called images without words, images where signification and representation always exceed the efforts to constrain and enframe their production of meaning, where representations may not be directly linked to a specific content or reality.

I would like to suggest that what Michaels discovered in the viewing experience of the Walpiri was not their transparent use of the medium or the image, not the collapse of the real into the pictorial. Rather, the Walpiri transformed the video image into a complex

and multi-layered sign system. They presumed no denotative relationship between the picture and the landscape because the landscape as such was already defined by a symbolic network of meanings. The crucial question given what I have been saying is why our culture has so much difficulty recognizing the presence of the symbolic, the mesh of sign systems, in the landscapes which <u>we</u> create on film and video? Why, to begin with are we so attracted to collapsing image and referent? It will not be the purpose of what follows to answer this question though the examples which I will talk about do shed some light on how far behind we are as a culture with respect to understanding our own desires in relation to images. What the Walpiri teach us is that there is no prior moment before meaning, before the message, before a technology such as video comes upon a scene. So many messages are already there, already in place, that our desire to eliminate that complexity, that layering bespeaks a paradoxical primitivism with respect to images and meaning. Of course the intertextuality which is fundamental to the way in which the Walpiri transform the visible world cannot so easily be included in the image, **at least not** in the image as we understand it.

Any presumption with respect to the communication of ideas which prioritizes the image over everything else runs the risk of searching for meaning outside of the context of its production. It is fascinating that in our culture the production of images is responded to as if images exist in an autonomous realm as if, in sense, we must search <u>within</u> them for meaning. The Walpiri don't just see differently from us. They recognize the influence of context in a manner which we have yet to understand. So the questions raised about the way in which they filmed one of their most sacred sites must be redirected towards our culture, towards the manner in which colonial cultures interpret their own production of meaning and to the resulting strategies which we take towards <u>the technologies</u> which we introduce to others.

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"I was thinking. . . .
no history written for us when white European start here,
only few words written,
Should be more of that.

Should be written way Aborigine was live.
That floodplain. . . .
my father, my mother, my grandfather
all used to hunt there,
use ironweed spear.
No clothes then.

When I was growing up
good mob of people all arounf then.
Now people a bit wicked.
My time never do a little wrong. . . .
otherwise get spear straight away.
Now. . . . little bit cheeky mob.
Old time they would all be dead now.
Old people were hard. . . .
I frightened when young.
Only few people now,
bit it easy for this mob.

Anyway, got to be made that book.
There's still time.
No man can growl at me for telling this story,
because it will be too late. . . .
I'll be dead. (Bill Neidjie) [8]

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3. Cinéma d'Information Politique

In the1970s I was involved with a political group which used video and film as a tool for

the dissemination of information and as a pedagogical instrument in the community. The

aim of the group was to create a series of short videotapes which would function as "actualités" - brief news-style documentaries for the most part centered on strikes which would then be used in meetings and on local public-access television. We used half-inch black and white porta-packs which were cumbersome and technologically quite imposing.

Our most important project was a strike at the local Noranda chemical plant in Valleyfield, a suburb of Montreal.[9] The aim was to make a videotape with the workers which could be used to rally other workers to their cause and which could also be used for purposes of solidarity among the strikers. The video was divided into seven parts: a history of the strike; the reasons for making the video; the history of the chemical plant whose primary purpose was the production of fertilizers; a history of Noranda; a discussion of how workers organize to resist large corporations; the actual prospects for the strike itself; and finally an overview of the strike in relation to other strikes in Quebec. I will not go too deeply into the video here. For the purposes of this article what interests me is the methodology which we used to make the video and in particular the way we organized the workers to participate in its production and creation. I am particularly interested in the assumptions which we had about messages and about how they communicate through images, if at all.

Our group was divided into two factions. One faction wanted to make a propaganda statement which would communicate at a popular and populist level to a broad and representative cross-section of workers. The other faction was less concerned with communication per se and more committed to the content of what could be said. This committment to content privileged certain kinds of statements over others and in general transformed the video creation process into a support for a specific ideology. Over time the latter faction became dominant and as the coherence of our ideological beliefs grew

more sophisticated and more developed the video creation process became a support for the transparent enunciation of that position. As is often the case the clarity of the message didn't actually produce the anticipated results from the viewers who watched the videotapes.

During one shooting session with a group of strikers at a particularly difficult moment of the strike a conflict developed between the cameraman, a group of us and three of the workers who wanted to tell a more personal story about the health effects of the chemicals they worked with. I will not go into the details of that conflict here suffice to say that the workers set up the scene. The camera was placed on a tripod and simply recorded their statements. In viewing the footage afterwards everyone agreed that it was quite unfulfilling and without either aesthetic or ideological impact.

This was the first in a series of similar experiences which began to divide us, both within the video group and between the group and the workers. The divisions were ultimately about different ways of seeing the video medium, about different perceptions of television and how to create it. In the final analysis it was professionals against amateurs, but the real battle was between different visions. It is an irony that the people we wanted to communciate with actually had a distinct understanding of the medium but perhaps the paradoxes of that contradiction are what we should have learned from and given our preconceptions as to what effectively worked as communication we should have been more adaptable.

As it turns out the two stories told by the workers in what appeared to be a banal manner anticipated a context in which the videotape was merely one part of a more complex process of interaction between viewers, supporters and strikers. They invested far less in the image than we had anticipated, expected realism, and were gratified with the

directness and clarity of what was said. This expectation about the image was not the result of any lack of sophistication. It saw the image in practical terms but didn't see it as a consciousness raising device. To be blunt, the workers and their supporters already knew the message and were not looking for suprises where none was necessary.

This example highlights the way in which expectations about communication can in fact become a substitute for exchange. It points out what Eric Michaels so astutely observed among the Walpiri. Images <u>seem</u> to contain within them, not only messages but the maps needed to understand those messages. The minute that particular kind investment in the image is foregrounded the context of communication takes on greater and greater significance. The result is a rather different message which is dependent on cultural specificity and local history. "Comparisons between Walpiri story form and imported video fictions demonstrated that in many instances content (what is supplied in the narrative) and context (what must be assumed) are so different from one system to the other that they might be said to be reversed. For example, Walpiri narrative will provide detailed kinship relationships between all characters as well as establishing a kinship domain for each. When Hollywood videos fail to say where Rocky's grandmother is, or who is taking care of his sister-in-law, Walpiri viewers discuss the matter and need to fill in the missing content. By contrast, personal motivation is unusual in Aboriginal stories; characters do things because the class (kin, animal, plant) of which they are a member is known to behave this way. This produces interesting indigenous theories, for example, of national character to explain behaviour in **Midnight Express** or **The A-Team**. But equally interesting, it tends to ignore narrative exposition and character development, focusing instead on dramatic action (as do Aboriginal stories themselves)." (Michaels 1988: 119)

The use of video in the community is full of potential pitfalls. In our case the desire to communicate through images overwhelmed the very people we wanted to engage with and consequently the video became more important to us than our personal interaction with the strikers. We wanted to create a pedagogical tool and didn't apply that to the manner in which we used video, hoping instead that the image would somehow smooth out the more serious problems of social and cultural difference. It may be the case, and we just weren't able to confront this adequately, that the strikers and our video group didn't speak the same language, didn't know how to find points of contact, didn't as a consequence know how to engage in the political process. This striking heterogeneity is not a negative, rather, it supports the idea that the use of video within our own culture faces many of the same problems which ethnographers encounter with cultures different from our own.

4. The Marshall Islands

In November of 1988 I was invited to the Marshall Islands to advise a group of videomakers working under the aegis of the <u>Museum of the Marshall Islands</u>. My primary contact with the Marshalls had been through Denis O'Rouke's film, **Half-Life** and the book **Day of the Two Suns: U.S. Nuclear Testing and the Pacific Islanders** by Jane Dibblin. [10]

The Marshall Islands occupies 70 square miles in what is in reality hundreds of coral atolls and islands. The Marshalls are scattered over a half a million square miles of ocean. They have been used and abused by a variety of colonizers from the Russians to the Japanese to the Americans and the Germans. Many Marshallese are still very ill as a result of American nuclear testing in the 1940s and1950s. Some atolls remain uninhabitable. The scandal of American colonialism has produced squalor and disease,

birth defects and hunger. These once beautiful atolls and islands where the people used to live in a symbiotic relationship with the ocean have become crowded, with inadequate housing and little fresh water. Many of the lagoons have garbage floating in them, partially buried ships whose rust has leached into the sand and old machinery, abandoned because of a lack of spare parts.

The main island of Majuro is the centre of most commercial activity and is where the government has its offices. Recently the Marshall Islands government proposed to take garbage from the mainland U.S.A. and dump it in the atolls as a way of making some money. Over the last fifty years the islanders have lost a sense of their own heritage and history as they have struggled to survive neo-colonialism, one of the highest infant mortality rates in the Pacific and a bankrupt economy which is kept going by American grants. Even today the islands are used for missle testing with long range inter-ballistic missles sent over from California. One of the atolls continues to have a large American base on it.

The small video unit which operates out of the museum broadcasts on television once a week for a two hour period. Usually their shows are historical in nature reflecting a desire on the part of the Marsallese to gain some measure of control over their own past and to develop visual ways of interpreting it. The extraordinary thing about television in Majuro is that all of the shows come from the U.S. in videocassette form and specifically from Hawaiian broadcasting companies. As a result 'conventional' television is dominated by advertising from Hawaii. I found it a disturbing if not disheartening experience to watch consumer goods being advertised, such as cars and homes and stereos, which clearly few on the island could ever dream of having. But I was really taken aback when I watched the "news" and realised that it was two to three months out of date. The cassettes, I was told, take months to process and then are sent to the American base first. The news came

to me in a time warp and contradicted its very purpose, its raison d'être, which was of course to report on events as they happened. I quickly understood the importance of the two hours which the museum crew diligently worked on every week.

I cannot fully detail the rather complex experience which I had in the Marshalls. Instead I will comment on one particular shooting experience to further exemplify and elaborate on the debates which I have been discussing in this article. The video crew had decided to produce a show on traditional methods of making rope and twine. This used to be a well-practiced craft on Majuro but now very few people know how to make rope. The crew and I (four people in all) went by car to the furthest tip of the atoll, about twenty-five miles from the town. There used to be many palm trees on the atoll but now they are confined to small sections and usually are on private land. It is quite a feat to drive on Majuro. The roads are barely that, though you wouldn't know it from the modern airport. During the hour which it took to get to the palms we discussed how to film the cutting down of thirty or so coconuts, the hulls of which would serve as the raw material for the rope.

The cameraman was very concerned with getting some shots of the men in the trees and suggested a slow tracking pan as one of the men climbed up and then a long shot of the coconut being cut down. I asked if he wanted to get a shot of the facial expression of the climber and in fact if he wanted any close-ups prior to the climb to highlight the happy feelings which everyone had about doing the video. The cameraman felt that because they were shooting a re-enactment it would be more important to shoot it in a straightforward and direct manner.

This approach coincided with a recent show which they had done on an upcoming census during which a government official read from a prepared text. The camera was kept in

one position throughout, prioritizing the content of the presenter's discourse over the image. In fact it seemed as if the image was just a prop for the sound.

A few minutes into the shoot at the palm grove and I realised that the same process was afoot. The crew were anticipating a voice-over which would explain the content of the re-enactment. Their shots were very static and often quite random. They rarely zoomed in. The camera was always on a tripod. Could it be, I asked myself, that this static approach was in fact a response to the frenetic kind of television which they were getting from Hawaii? Was the desire to make sound the central experience of viewing a challenge to the viewing itself? Now, this may not have been as conscious as I am suggesting but if, for the most part television in the Marshalls is overwhelmingly dominated by gaps - temporal, spatial - then perhaps a static image, effectively a sound-tape with image might in fact be a strategic way of making a statement and making it differently.

Coconut hulls have to be soaked for a number of weeks before they can be used for ropemaking and as we buried the hulls at the edge of a beach I noticed the cameraman slowly panning the area. I asked him why afterwards and he explained that he wanted to edit the image of the sea together with the ropemaking. But on the way back to town the crew decided they wouldn't use that shot. We had worked for about five hours and had two full videocassettes. We returned to the studio near the museum which is housed in a small shack adjacent to the main building and the crew set about editing the video. They worked very quickly. Then quite abruptly they decided that they needed an interview and went looking for one of the researchers in the museum, an elder and one of the few remaining men on Majuro who knew anything about ropemaking. They set him up in the studio and he began to speak about the process and about how important it was for the Marshallese to know this information. When he finished, the editing began again and this

time the interview became the central focus of the tape. In other words voice would again become the centerpiece of their show.

Now of course this is my perception of their use of sound, my perception of how the crew was juxtaposing visual and oral elements. But that evening I was shown portions of a six hour tape on a Christmas dance which had been held in the local church. For the most part the camera was again static. The 'scene' so to speak was oral. After a while the dancing music didn't illustrate the image. Both the sound and the image disappeared into the background and a very gentle, almost meditative feeling overcame the tape. I realised that this wasn't meant to be a record of the event. Rather, the camera was incidental to the ceremony, just another part of the scene. The fact that the event was being preserved in some form had little to do with the way in which it was being filmed. When I asked what was going to be done with the tape I was told that it would be kept in the museum. Beyond that not much was exchanged and in some senses nothing needed to be added. This was in part because the tape was far less significant than I had assumed. In fact the crew videotaped many events and simply turned them over to the museum without any editing, often without even looking at the footage.

I was confronted with a rather interesting paradox. I assumed a kind of directedness to the process. If you make a video you not only have something to say, but I would have thought that the completed video was designed to fit into a particular context of communication. Of course, the context which I was assuming was not the one crew had decided upon. They knew what was on the tape. Portions of it could perhaps be used at a later date. While I thought that the tape was illustrative, for them the tape was the event. Thus there was no need to add or subtract anything from it. From the outside this might appear as a lack of motivation. Far from it. I had taken for granted the 'idea' that

videotapes or films, once made, produced, shot, had to be transformed into objects for viewing. In this instance the viewing had, so to speak, already taken place.

I am reminded here of a very crucial insight by Paul Rabinow in his book **Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco.** He talks about the common sense or everyday assumptions which guide the way people in a particular culture interact. This infrastructure of shared viewpoints, mutual understandings with respect to meaning is like a map where all of the elements are in place, where the direction markers do not need to be reconstructed everytime people talk or have some sort of exchange. But as Rabinow suggests, in our own culture common sense is a very fragile base upon which to build and sustain processes of communication and social relations. In another culture even when problems of language have been surmounted the common sense base is considerably weaker. (Rabinow 1977:30) My supposition with respect to the museum crew's use of video, my desire to see a more directed and hence more productive use of the images, was situated in my prior assumptions with respect to the medium. Rabinow uses the word thin to explain this kind of implosion. Misunderstandings grow out of situations in which the "taken for granted" maps are used without detailed and careful examination.

There is as much danger in mystifying the possiblities of communication and exchange as there is in pointing out the pitfalls. I believe that my interaction with the museum crew was mutually beneficial. But as John von Sturmer points out there is a distinct difference between 'intervening' in another society's everyday existence and in their projects and immersing oneself in their daily lives. "Is there any intervention in the lives of these societies that is not destructive? Can we envisage such a possibility? In attempting to answer these questions I find it useful to oppose *presence* to *intervention* — a presence that represents a commitment to a life-within, tothe maintenance of the community as community, a willingness to be made over in relation to the group, and an unwillingness

to concede therefore that an existence separate from the group is possible. Against immersion, intervention is always extraneous. The latter comes from the outside; it presupposes a position of otherness. But immersion itself cannot proceed until a change occurs, not through any internal group demand or necessity, but because some external agent requires it. Intervention may therefore serve as a prelude to immersion, but not necessarily so. One can live within the group and yet attempt to impose one's own standards." [11]

5. Conclusion

It seems clear to me now, both with respect to my work in political video in the early seventies and the work I did in the Marshalls, that the paradoxes of intervention are at the heart of the debates which Eric Michaels engaged in. His understanding of this problem was heightened by his use of video rather than the opposite, because inside the contradictions of image construction one finds not only the social and cultural patterns of the society which uses the images but also, and crucially, the specific boundaries which enframe the production of meaning at a more generalized level. It may be very difficult to cross those boundaries because of the shared otherness which images so clearly reveal. The otherness extends into every use of video or film, in one's own community or in communities one visits. The dangers are many including the desire to collapse that otherness into a more homogenuous model of image production and comprehension, to search for the kind of intercultural base which ethnographers have now recognized weakens if not undermines the reseach which can be undertaken. In nurturing and supporting the specifity of the Aboriginal response to video and to the media in general Eric Michaels didn't overcome these contradictions but more than anyone else he pointed out their role and influence, their 'effects' — in so doing he also made a significant contribution to the way in which our own culture can see and understand itself.

[1] See Chapter Four of **The Predicament of Culture** (1988) in which Clifford argues for a redefinition of the history of surrealism in order to show the close if not parallel development of ethnography and surrealist thinking.

[2] I am thinking of the work of Edmund Carpenter (1970); James Clifford (1988); Jean Comaroff (1985); Vincent Crapazano (1980); Michel De Certeau (1984); Johannes Fabian (1983); Clifford Geertz (1988); George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986); Paul Rabinow (1977).

[3] Eric Michaels (1982). This is an essay in a superb collection edited by Jay Ruby, entitled, **A Crack in the Mirror** (1982).

[4] Michaels often refers to the research in this monograph as fieldwork but in some sense he goes far beyond fieldwork, per se. He enters the realm of policy recommendations and has clearly written the monograph for researchers as well as politicians and bureaucrats.

[5] Allen S. Weiss, "Outside In: Some New Improved Anxieties of Influence," in **Art & Text**, 35 (Summer, 1990), p. 97.

[6] Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* , (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972) pp. 304-305.

[7] I would refer the reader to David Macey's recent book, *Lacan in Contexts,* Verso, 1988. Macey traces out the rather superficial way in which Lacan was appropriated by film studies. I would, however dispute his conclusion that this may have in fact invalidated the research which was produced as a consequence of the appropriation.

[8] See **Kakadu Man** (1985). This extraordinary prose poem ends with an invocation to the white man to realise his/her own implication in the future of the earth.

[9] Noranda was recently involved in the attempt to construct a pulp and paper mill in Tasmania. It is ironic that they claimed to be a corporation known in Canada for their concern for the environment since that is about the last thing for which they are famous.

[10] Jane Dibblin, **Day of Two Suns: U.S. Nuclear Testing and the Pacific Islanders** (London: Virago Press, 1988)

[11] John von Sturmer, "Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia," **Art & Text**, #32, Autumn 1989, p.137.